

Obituaries

Douglas Costle, an architect of the EPA who became its top administrator, dies at 79

By Matt Schudel

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Douglas M. Costle, an early architect of the Environmental Protection Agency who became the regulatory agency's top administrator during the Carter administration and helped initiate the "Superfund" program to clean up hazardous-waste sites, died Jan. 13 at his home in McLean, Va. He was 79.

He had complications from strokes, said his wife, Betsy Costle.

After working for the Justice Department's civil rights division in the mid-1960s, Mr. Costle later was named to a White House advisory council with the aim of reorganizing the executive branch.

He was instrumental in outlining the scope of an independent agency designed to coordinate efforts to enforce environmental laws to prevent pollution and protect citizens' health. President Richard M. Nixon formally launched the EPA by executive order in December 1970.

Mr. Costle was a consultant to the agency during its infancy and later directed the state environmental protection commission in Connecticut before returning to Washington. He was named EPA director in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.

"Clear air is not an aesthetic luxury," Mr. Costle said upon taking office. "It is a public health necessity."

At his first news conference, he went after the country's best-known luxury-car brand — Cadillac. He called on the company to recall 135,000 of its automobiles from the 1975 model year, particularly those with giant 500-cubic-inch engines, because their carburetors emitted excessive amounts of carbon monoxide, in violation of the Clean Air Act.

When Cadillac conducted tests on its cars, Mr. Costle noted, they "yielded a 100 percent failure rate for carbon monoxide."

In his first two months on the job, Mr. Costle added 600 scientists and other professionals to the EPA staff.

"We are past the social debate over whether it is a good thing to protect the environment," he told The Washington Post in 1977. "The debate now is how to do it. We're at the difficult stage of practical problem-solving. You can't have growth without effective pollution control."

In his efforts to balance the needs of public health with the corporate financial interests, Mr. Costle came under attack from both sides.

Early in his tenure, more than 1,000 demonstrators were arrested during protests at the construction site of a nuclear power plant in Seabrook, N.H. The plant's cooling system would use ocean water, then pump it back in the sea — but 39 degrees warmer than the prevailing ocean temperature.

At a public meeting, one protester pulled two dead fish from her handbag and gave them to Mr. Costle. Supporters of the power plant, on the other hand, said the EPA was saying fish were more important than electricity for the people of New England. After two years of findings, Mr. Costle approved the Seabrook nuclear plant's open-ocean cooling system in 1978 and said his agency's limited role was to determine whether the water heated by a nuclear reactor would damage fish and plant life.

In 1979, the EPA and other federal agencies secured a \$400 million consent decree with the country's largest steelmaker, Pittsburgh-based U.S. Steel, to make major upgrades to reduce air pollution at its manufacturing plants. Mr. Costle called the accord "the largest environmental agreement in the history of the steel industry."

When EPA skeptics charged that environmental regulations were ruining businesses, Mr. Costle countered that most pollution came from the poor use of raw materials. He also argued that many business proponents discounted the health costs of air pollution. Each year from 1970 to 1977, he said, EPA regulations saved an estimated \$8 billion in wages and productivity.

One of the country's most serious environmental catastrophes came to light in the 1970s, when toxic waste buried by a chemical company in Upstate New York began seeping up through the earth and entering the water supply. Named after a onetime canal project, the Love Canal disaster prompted Carter to declare a state of emergency in 1978. Hundreds of families were relocated by the federal government.

As a result, Mr. Costle became one of the leading advocates of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, better known as "Superfund," which has resulted in the cleanup of hazardous waste sites around the country.

Mr. Costle left office after Ronald Reagan's presidential victory in 1980.

"I believed that the most important thing was to get facts on the table," Mr. Costle later said. "My motto is, 'Facts are friendly.' People with different political philosophies can come to the same problem and reach similar conclusions, unless they are ideologues."

Douglas Michael Costle was born July 27, 1939, in Long Beach, Calif., and grew up mostly in Seattle. His father was an engineer, his mother a medical administrator.

He graduated from Harvard University in 1961 and from the University of Chicago law school in 1964. A year before graduating from law school, he did field work for the Justice Department in Mississippi.

After leaving the EPA in 1981, he was an executive with a company that developed environmental testing methods. He was dean of the independent Vermont Law School from 1987 to 1991, helping build one of the country's premier programs in environmental law.

In 1994, Mr. Costle ran for the U.S. Senate in Vermont, losing in the Democratic primary. He suffered a debilitating stroke in 1999 and had another severe stroke about five years ago. He settled in McLean in 2003.

Survivors include his wife of 53 years, the former Elizabeth "Betsy" Rowe of McLean; two children, Caroline Costle of Alexandria, Va., and Douglas M. Costle Jr. of Mill Valley, Calif.; and three grandchildren.

Mr. Costle gave voice to his environmental credo at a conference in Montreal in 1979.

"A taxed and tired electorate may well wonder if there will ever be an end to this struggle — whether we can ever get ahead of our pollution problems," he said. "My conviction is that we will. That will be a quiet victory. ... But it may be the most important victory any nation has ever won."

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. Follow [Twitter](#)

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